26/5/2011

To
The Executive Officer
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring St
East Melbourne, 3002

Submission to Inquiry into the Education of Gifted & Talented Students.

Dear Sir/Madam,

As a parent of both academically gifted and talented children, I feel it is relevant to relate my family’s experience and difficulties encountered in the Public School system.

Our locally zoned secondary school has a culture extremely unsuitable for providing optimal, or even just an acceptable, learning environment for my children.

Learning environment is one of the most significant influences on my children’s learning, and as such, the decision was made to send my children to the closest Secondary school with a culture and learning environment which will optimise our children’s chances of reaching their fullest potential academically and socially.

I currently have two sons attending secondary school. This is not our locally zoned school and does not provide Select Entry Accelerated Learning or other programs for gifted or talented students, it does however have the benefit of being a small regional school with a supportive, safe and friendly environment with dedicated staff. It will also become the closest secondary school (in distance) as my children reach Year 10 (next year, for my eldest son), although it still will not become our local zoned secondary school.

As my children do not attend their zoned school they are considered fare paying passengers on the school bus. Application was made to the Department of Education & Early Childhood Development for them to be exempted from those fares but rejected as policy dictates all schools are equal in educational value. This is clearly not the case.

My children’s secondary school has subsidised bus fares in previous years so as not to disadvantage students who otherwise would be unable to attend their school. (It is the only secondary school in our
shore, our towns and communities are intrinsically linked and again, it is the closest secondary school from Year 10 onwards.) However, this year the Department of Education & Early Childhood Development has disallowed this subsidy leaving families facing the enormous cost of paying for bus fares not budgeted for on enrollment at this school.

As a low income family, payment of fares for the school bus creates extreme financial hardship for our family. This, in turn, makes basic educational tools unaffordable in our home. Internet access and other technological support eg. modern computers, updated programs and software and a range of educational programs; for my children are financially impossible.

Public access to the internet in our town, for my children, is limited to 30 minutes after arriving home from school and Saturday mornings (depending on availability through a booking system at the local library).

This lack of technological support for my children is due entirely to lack of finances and impacts on their learning.

As my third son moves to secondary school next year, we are faced with the dilemma of withdrawing our children from the most suitable school for their learning needs or providing food, clothing and shelter. If we have to send our children to our locally zoned school not only will their learning be seriously impeded but the affect on their emotional and social development and community awareness and connectedness will be devastating and irreparable.

The Department of Education & Early Childhood Development hardline policy on school zoning and bus fares will directly impact on my gifted child and my two talented children reaching their full potential in their academic and social development by forcing a decision between the most appropriate learning environment for them or the provision of the basic necessities of life.

The differing cultures between schools play an enormous role in the quality of education and support provided by schools which is the reason I believe the Department of Education & Early Childhood Development needs to develop policy that recognises the need for access to differing learning environments is required by all students so students can choose the one that suits their learning style thus maintaining interest and participation in education and better chances of reaching their full potential.

My family has blindly stumbled through the primary school system and now the secondary school system without any support, guidance or information on what it means to have a gifted or talented student and how to assist them. This task has been made even more difficult as neither myself nor their father are tertiary educated or particularly computer or technologically literate. I am unaware of any policies and/or programs available for gifted or talented students available at my children’s school or in our area (except SEAL program operating from Mt Clear Secondary College), and feel if there are any such policies and/or programs they are not widely promoted.
Ability of teachers to stretch syllabus content to cater for gifted and talented students needs to be addressed, especially for years preceding Year 10. Currently it takes approaches from parents suggesting more challenging work which is usually met with a positive attitude, however often, the offer for entry into competitions (Maths, Science and Writing) is a short term solution which does not provide stimulation and advancement of these students over the whole year.

I trust you will consider my comments as part of your inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Skeyhill

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